

SERMON for Epiphany 1 - January 9th, 2022.

Readings: Isaiah 43: 1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8: 14-17; Luke 3: 15-22.

In the name of God: Source of all being, Eternal Word and Life-giving Spirit.

Who are you? Where do you belong?

Mm! We could leap in and say “that’s easy! I’m ***** and I live *****”. But how can we prove that?

I remember when Chris and I came back from New Zealand in the late ‘80s. Beside the 25% interest rates on credit cards, the other main source of conversation was the Australia Card which the government of the time was trying to bring in. I remember the fear campaign the opposition and civil liberties groups waged. And in the end the legislation was thrown out. It is ironic that the arguments about civil liberties and privacy are still around, even though we now have Medicare cards, myGov websites, mobile phones and social media.

Today, having documentation on you or close at hand to prove who you are, is pretty much the norm. You can’t open a bank account without getting your 100 points, and this is similar for a number of “official” documents. There are some parcels you can’t pick up from the Post Office without identification, and certainly if you want to post a parcel overseas you need identification.

Birth certificates, drivers’ licences, passports (they are the best kind) ... but one wonders if it would have been any simpler or less invasive with the Australia Card!

Then of course is the reality that most of us are easily trackable through mobile phone or our use of our debit or credit cards, let alone social media.

Of course, the other big issue today to do with identification is the insidious identity theft, which is becoming more and more a problem in our increasingly high-tech society. How can you prove who you are?

So ... who are you?

That other question I asked was: where do you belong? Or maybe I could phrase it: to whom do you belong?

One of the greatest longings for most people is to belong somewhere, to fit in, to be cared for (and in that I don’t necessarily mean to be looked after, but for someone to care about you, love you, matter that you are alive). I think it is one of the basic needs of humankind, to make relationship with someone or some group.

So ... where do you belong?

We may come up with a litany of answers which are made up of how we see ourselves, or would like ourselves to be:

“Hi I am Sally. I am a daughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother, friend, Franciscan, priest I belong in my family, in my community, in my country”

That’s where I place myself ... but is that really who I am? Where I belong? And do these answers really satisfy?

There is a strong theme which runs through our readings today: one of identity and belonging.

In Isaiah 43, we hear God's message, Israel.

Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you. I've called your name. You're mine.

These are words to a bruised, bloodied and beleaguered people. They are in exile. But God still loves them and offers comfort and hope.

The *Message* version puts it:

When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you. When you're in rough waters, you will not go down. When you're between a rock and a hard place, it won't be a dead end - Because I am God, your personal God, The Holy of Israel, your Saviour. I paid a huge price for you: all of Egypt, with rich Cush and Seba thrown in! That's how much you mean to me! That's how much I love you! I'd sell off the whole world to get you back, trade the creation just for you. [Isaiah 43: 2-4]

If, for a moment, the people of Israel felt diminished and lost because of their situation, they were to worry no more. God says you are valued and honoured. Count on that.

How much? - God says I know you. I know you not just by fact that you exist, I know you by name.

Do you hear that? BY NAME! God isn't expecting you to have to prove your identity every five minutes - God knows you. By name. God knows you belong. No one, absolutely no one, can steal your identity where God is concerned!

But there is more. God knows you, not because you are some kind of perfect person or exemplary Christian. God knows you INSPITE of your failures, bad decision making and your sins.

That is important stuff. Far too often we think that because we are imperfect in some way or we feel shame about something we have done, God does not or cannot love us anymore.

Nonsense. This passage, if no other in the Bible, reminds us that God does not stop laying claim to us, even when we are irresponsible and wilful in ignoring God.

It doesn't matter, says God, You're mine.

It is important that we remember the Gospel reading for this morning in parallel with this reading from Isaiah. It is the story of Jesus' own baptism. It is the same waters of baptism as we experienced where we are marked and signed by God as belonging to God. ¹

"You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased". [Luke 3:22b]

You are mine.

Most of us look for our place in the world, that place where we can be who we are, if you like, who we were created to be, and that place where we belong.

For me, the next lesson on this year's epiphany journey of discovery, is the outpouring of God's love and acceptance for us.

A deep sense of God's acceptance of who I am, and my acknowledgement of to whom I belong.

This doesn't mean that it doesn't matter about the way I live my life, that I don't need to continue to examine the way I live my life and continue to repent, say sorry when I mess up and try to turn my life around.

But it does mean that despite my failures, God loves me deeply, passionately and claims me.

I pray that this Epiphany, you may hear the revelation in God's words, the revelation that is ours through our own baptism, that we have been claimed for eternity by the Creator of the Universe:

“Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you. I've called your name. You're mine. ²When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you. When you're in rough waters, you will not go down. When you're between a rock and a hard place, it won't be a dead end— ³Because I am God, your personal God, The Holy of Israel, your Savior. I paid a huge price for you: all of Egypt, with rich Cush and Seba thrown in! ⁴*That's* how much you mean to me! *That's* how much I love you! I'd sell off the whole world to get you back, trade the creation just for you.” [Isaiah 43: 1b-4 – *The Message*]

Remember: Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you. I've called your name. You're mine.

Revd Sally Buckley
January 9, 2022

REFERENCES:

1. David Shearman in his sermon *You're mine - God* as posted on *midrash* 12.01.2013.